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## UNDERSTANDING THE WTO: DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

### Overview

About two thirds of the WTO's around 150 members are developing countries. They play an increasingly important and active role in the WTO because of their numbers, because they are becoming more important in the global economy, and because they increasingly look to trade as a vital tool in their development efforts. Developing countries are a highly diverse group often with very different views and concerns. The WTO deals with the special needs of developing countries in three ways:

- the **WTO agreements** contain **special provisions** on developing countries



- the **Committee on Trade and Development** is the main body focusing on work in this area in the WTO, with some others dealing with specific topics such as trade and debt, and technology transfer

- the **WTO Secretariat** provides **technical assistance** (mainly training of various kinds) for developing countries.

### In the agreements: more time, better terms [back to top](#)













The WTO agreements include numerous provisions giving developing and least-developed countries special rights or extra leniency – “special and differential treatment”. Among these are provisions that allow developed countries to treat developing countries more favourably than other WTO members.

The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, which deals with trade in goods) has a special section (Part 4) on Trade and Development which includes provisions on the concept of non-reciprocity in trade negotiations between developed and developing countries – when developed countries grant trade concessions to developing countries they should not expect the developing countries to make matching offers in return.

Both GATT and the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) allow developing countries

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some preferential treatment.

Other measures concerning developing countries in the WTO agreements include:

- **extra time** for developing countries to fulfil their commitments (in many of the WTO agreements)
- provisions designed to increase developing countries' **trading opportunities** through greater market access (e.g. in [textiles](#), [services](#), [technical barriers to trade](#))
- provisions requiring WTO members to **safeguard the interests** of developing countries when adopting some domestic or international measures (e.g. in [anti-dumping](#), [safeguards](#), [technical barriers to trade](#))
- provisions for various **means of helping** developing countries (e.g. to deal with commitments on [animal and plant health standards](#), [technical standards](#), and in strengthening their domestic telecommunications sectors).

### Legal assistance: a Secretariat service

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The [WTO Secretariat](#) has special legal advisers for assisting developing countries in any WTO dispute and for giving them legal counsel. The service is offered by the WTO's Training and Technical Cooperation Institute. Developing countries regularly make use of it.

Furthermore, in 2001, 32 WTO governments set up an Advisory Centre on WTO law. Its members consist of countries contributing to the funding, and those receiving legal advice. All least-developed countries are automatically eligible for advice. Other developing countries and transition economies have to be fee-paying members in order to receive advice.

### Least-developed countries: special

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The [least-developed countries](#) receive extra attention in the WTO. All the WTO agreements recognize that they must benefit from the greatest possible flexibility, and better-off members must make extra efforts to lower import barriers on least-developed countries' exports.

Since the Uruguay Round agreements were signed in 1994, several decisions in favour of least-developed countries have been taken.

Meeting in Singapore in 1996, WTO ministers agreed on a “Plan of Action for Least-Developed Countries”. This included technical assistance to enable them to participate better in the multilateral system and a pledge from developed countries to improved market access for least-developed countries’ products.

A year later, in October 1997, six international organizations – the [International Monetary Fund](#), the International Trade Centre, the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development, the United Nations Development Programme, the [World Bank](#) and the WTO – launched the “Integrated Framework”, a joint technical assistance programme exclusively for least-developed countries.

In 2002, the WTO adopted a work programme for least-developed countries. It contains several broad elements: improved market access; more technical assistance; support for agencies working on the diversification of least-developed countries’ economies; help in following the work of the WTO; and a speedier membership process for least-developed countries negotiating to join the WTO.

At the same time, more and more member governments have unilaterally scrapped import duties and import quotas on all exports from least-developed countries.

### A ‘maison’ in Geneva: being present is important, but not easy for all [back to top](#)

The WTO’s official business takes place mainly in Geneva. So do the unofficial contacts that can be equally important. But having a permanent office of representatives in Geneva can be expensive. Only about one third of the 30 or so least-developed countries in the WTO have permanent offices in Geneva, and they cover all United Nations activities as well as the WTO.

As a result of the negotiations to locate the WTO headquarters in Geneva, the Swiss government has agreed to provide subsidized office space for delegations from least-developed countries.

A number of WTO members also provide financial support for ministers and accompanying officials from least-developed countries to help them attend WTO ministerial conferences.